Newcastle University e-prints

City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek lives in Roman Egypt
Peter Parsons *Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 320pp, £25*
ISBN 0297645889

Archaeology is a notoriously slow and painstaking science: months of careful brushing and trowelling often yield little more than a few pieces of bone, the odd rusty coin and a pile of discarded pottery. Few excavations get off to the sort of start achieved by two Oxford archaeologists, B P Grenfell and A S Hunt, when they sailed down the Nile in 1896 in search of papyrus.

Papyrus was a material up to then largely ignored by Victorian scholars, who had tended to concentrate their attentions on classical inscriptions on stone. Intending to change this, and track down a few lost fragments of classical Greek and early Christian literature, the two scholars decided to investigate the mounds in the Egyptian village of El-Bahnasa, having heard rumours that illicit antiquity dealers had been finding papyri there.

The modern village squatted on the site formerly occupied by Oxyrhynchus, which means "City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish". Of this great Greek metropolis remarkably little was left: a lithograph published in 1798 by Denon, one of the artists of the Napoleonic *Survey of Egypt*, showed little more than a few mounds, a single Roman column, the dome of a mosque and some palm trees. It was certainly nothing like the usual destinations of European archaeological expeditions such as the tombs of the Pharaohs, which, not long before, the Italian adventurer Belzoni had been entering with the aid of a battering ram; less still did the nondescript mounds resemble the Great Pyramids, one of whose hidden chambers had recently been penetrated by a rival British team who, with the characteristic delicacy of the Victorians abroad, achieved their results by the liberal use of dynamite.

Grenfell and Hunt were made of different and more scholarly stuff. Looking around on arrival, they quickly realised that they were on to something: "The papyri were, as a rule, not very far from the surface," wrote an excited Grenfell in the *journal of the Egypt Exploration Fund* the following year. "In one patch of ground, indeed, merely turning up the soil with one's boot would frequently disclose a layer of papyri . . ."

On the second day of the excavations, Dr Hunt was examining a crumpled fragment that had just been found by the workmen. It contained only a few legible lines of text, but one of these contained the very rare Greek word *karphos*, which means "a mote". Immediately, Hunt made the connection with the verse in St Matthew's Gospel about

the mote in your brother's eye; yet, with a thrill, Hunt realised that the wording differed significantly from the Gospel.

The fragment turned out to be part of a lost collection of the Sayings of Jesus, which predated by hundreds of years any New Testament fragment then extant. This was in turn later revealed to be a part of the long-lost Gnostic Gospel of Thomas. "I proceeded to increase the number of workmen gradually up to 110," wrote Grenfell, "and as we moved over other parts of the site, the flow of papyri soon became a torrent which it was difficult to cope with . . ."

By the end of the first season, Grenfell and Hunt had discovered an entire library of lost classics, including a tattered verse by Sappho in which she prays for her brother's safe return - a poem not seen by human eyes since the fall of Rome. There was also the only known comedy by Sophocles, Pindar's *Paeans*, Euripides's *Hypsipyle*, the earliest papyrus of St Matthew's Gospel then known, and a leaf of a previously unheard-of book of New Testament Apocrypha, the Acts of Paul and Thecla. The site even yielded whole genres of which nothing had been known before - a classical comic novel, for example, and a sort of "tabloid biography". The diggers also discovered an entire archive of Byzantine correspondence that preserved the lost voices of Oxyrhynchus's bee-keepers and boat-makers, dyers and donkey-drivers, its weavers and wine merchants. All of these were bundled into Huntley & Palmers biscuit tins, and sent back to Oxford for translation.

Five seasons later, the excavation had yielded no fewer than half a million fragments of papyrus, some 700 boxes full - enough, remarks Peter Parsons in his fascinating and authoritative new book, not only to keep Grenfell and Hunt busy for the rest of their working lives, but also to swallow up the lives of - so far - "six generations of scholars", with many more boxes as yet unopened: "Volume I of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri came out in 1898; Volume LXII is due out in 2007; at least 40 more volumes are planned."

Parsons has been studying papyri for more than half a century, and for many of those years has been head of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri Project. Yet there is no sign in his writing that his enthusiasm has been in any way jaded by familiarity with box after box of these endlessly elusive and fragile scraps of scroll. Instead, he brilliantly conveys both the difficulty of working on the material and the excitement of the historical detective involved in the thrill of the chase: open a box of unpublished papyri and you never know what you will find - high poetry and vulgar farce, sales and loans, wills and contracts, tax returns and government orders, private letters, shopping lists and household accounts. Then there is the pleasure of comprehension: as you decipher the ink, still black after 2,000 years, you begin to make words out of letters and then sentences out of words; the eye looks for shapes, and the mind looks for sense, and the two in alliance turn a string of symbols into intelligible text.

If it was the literary discoveries that initially excited Grenfell and Hunt, subsequent generations of scholars have come to value even more the everyday material about Greek and Byzantine Egypt. For the rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus contained what Parsons calls "a time capsule of a very special kind. Pompei preserves a snapshot of Roman life, as it was on one catastrophic day, the buildings and bodies of those who

lived there. Oxyrhynchus offers the converse: not bodies or buildings, but a paper trail of a whole culture."

Much of the excitement of Parsons's book derives from the astonishingly contemporary feel of much of the material. A little boy, Theon, writes to his parents: "If you don't take me with you to Alexandria, I won't eat, I won't drink, so there." A correspondent named Akulas writing from cosmopolitan Alexandria admits he is missing his puppy, Soteris, and worries about her "since she now spends time by herself in the country". There is gossip about politicians consorting with rent boys, complaints about tax and death duties, even some muttered anxieties about the growing influence of Alexandria's Jewish lobby. And then there are the horribly contemporary religious fanatics, running around Egyptian city centres trying to lynch and assassinate writers and freethinkers, and to destroy idols and temples - though, in the fifth century, these fanatics were not Islamists, but early Coptic saints like St Cyril and his monks, "that black-robed tribe who eat more than elephants, sweeping across the country like a river in spate ravaging the temples".

In this sense, reading the book has the same extraordinary sense of human familiarity that one gets looking at the encaustic portraits from the Fayoum: those wax portraits you see in the British Museum and its Cairo counterpart that are so astonishingly lifelike that they can still make you gasp as you find yourself staring eyeball to eyeball with a soldier who could have fought at Actium, or a society lady who may have known Cleopatra. The faces still convey with penetrating immediacy the character of the different sitters: the fop and the courtesan, the anxious mother or the fat nouveau-riche matron, hung with gold, dripping with make-up. The viewer peers at them, trying to catch some hint of the strange sights they saw in late antique Egypt. But the smooth neoclassical faces stare us down; only these scrappy Oxyrhynchus papyri reveal what they could possibly be worrying about.

Yet, just as we are lulled into a sense of familiarity by the lives of these bookish correspondents and jobsworth tax collectors, we find that there are indeed huge gulfs of understanding between us and them. Just as, with the Fayoum portraits, you have to keep reminding yourself that the sitters are not from our world, that they are masks attached to Graeco-Egyptian mummies, covering the desiccated corpses of people who possibly saw the world through the glass of an initiate in the cult of Isis, or who maybe married their brother or sister (as late as the third century, Diocletian was still trying to outlaw incest in Egypt), so it is with the papyri, which contain moments that bring us up short: we read, for example, of how common it was to dispose of unwanted female babies at the rubbish dumps on the edge of town, where anyone could pick them up and raise them as their slaves.

Likewise, this was a world where the most popular fertility goddess was Athena-Thoeris, a deity who "united in one the grey-eyed goddess of the Acropolis with the pregnant hippopotamus of Egyptian tradition". Also open to recourse in erotic matters was Hekate, the Greek goddess of witches, of whom one prayer begged her to "deprive [my beloved] of sleep until she jumps up and comes to me, cherishing me and making love to me for the duration of her life".

The final word should go to Parsons, who writes in his conclusion of the strangeness of the whole miraculous survival of these Greek lives lived out in Roman and Byzantine Egypt:

Oxyrhynchus exists today as a waste-paper city, a virtual landscape that we can repopulate with living and speaking people. The theatre has vanished, but we still have the prompt-copies that the actors used. The baths have gone, but we can reconstruct their dynasties of cloakroom attendants. The market has vanished, but we know its porridge stall and its imported cow pats and harassed officials who collected the tax on brothels. Long dead citizens, of whom we have no portrait and no tombstone, communicate from their documents. For some we have enough for an entire soap opera [such as the saga of] Tryphon the weaver and his [many] wives. Egypt has always been concerned with immortality. Tryphon and countless others lived and died without ever knowing they were destined to such accidental immortality . . . through the written materials they threw away.